JumpStart 97 Special Edition: Check Up from the Neck Up

**How building your own fence can lead to a better life**

*Please reference: By Terra Shastri -Director of Business Development & Strategic Initiatives with the Ontario Veterinary Medical Association*

Having clear boundaries is essential to a healthy, balanced lifestyle. A boundary is a personal property line that marks those things for which we are responsible. In other words, boundaries define who we are and who we are not. Boundaries can be defined as the limits we set with other people, which indicate what we find acceptable and unacceptable in their behaviour toward us. The ability to know our boundaries generally comes from a healthy sense of self-worth or valuing yourself in a way that isn’t contingent on other people or the feelings they have toward you.

Psychotherapists, social workers and counsellors are taught about how setting professional boundaries with clients is crucial to their career. For veterinarians, the concept of setting boundaries can feel overwhelming at first. What if a client ends up going elsewhere? What if something happens to a patient because the client won’t pay for any of the treatment options? What if my team gets mad at me? What if they don’t like me? But what if having these boundaries allows you to feel happier as a veterinarian, a parent, a spouse, a sibling and a friend?

Dr. Betsy Charles, executive director of the Veterinary Leadership Institute, defines boundaries as, “Knowing what I’m willing to do and what I’m not willing to do based on my core values, and what it means to me.” Over the past few years, Dr. Charles has been on her own journey, with her husband slowly deteriorating from ALS (or Lou Gehrig’s disease) until he succumbed to his illness a year ago. “It really shifted priorities for me,” she says. “Through his illness, we were determined to do what mattered to us. The motivation was different for me to recognize who I really am and what my values are, which led to greater boundaries.”

**Start with the little things**

When coaching veterinarians on creating boundaries for themselves, Dr. Charles suggests starting with smaller boundaries to develop the required skillset. “Setting boundaries is a skillset just like resiliency,” she says. “Part of the reason I was able to walk through everything over these last few months is because I developed resiliency skills and boundaries to help me move forward.”

For example, some of the smaller boundaries could be setting the time for when you’re going to leave work, whether you’re ready or not, the amount of time you will allow for phone calls, or the window of time that you’ll take phone calls from clients. Dr. Charles goes to bed at 8:30 p.m. every night, so she can be up at 3:30 a.m. to begin her daily routine. Her morning routine is sacred to her because it starts her day off in a positive direction. She meditates and then goes to the gym for 5 a.m, where she’s built a community of support. “The days I don’t get to do my routine, like when I’m travelling, really throws my day off and I don’t feel as good,” she says. Her commitment to her routine means setting boundaries when it comes to socializing or other commitments with friends, family and colleagues to ensure she’s in bed by 8 p.m.

Evaluate what you need in your life and what you truly value. Do you need more time for exercise, so you can take care of yourself? Or do you need more time to connect with your kids? Begin by looking at Maslow’s hierarchy of needs. For example, evaluate your need for belonging and acceptance. Examine how well you have satisfied your need to love and be loved, as well as be respected and have self-respect. What extent are your boundaries helping or hindering the satisfaction of your needs?

Becoming more aware of your feelings will help you navigate your limits in different scenarios. Psychologist Dr. Dana Gionta has observed two key feelings in others that are red flags or cues that they’re letting go of their boundaries: discomfort and resentment. She suggests thinking of these feelings on a continuum from one to 10, with six or higher considered the high zone.

If you’re at the higher end of this continuum, during an interaction or in a situation, Dr. Gionta suggests asking yourself, “What is causing that? What is it about this interaction or the person’s expectation that’s bothering me?”

She says resentment is usually a result of being taken advantage of or not being appreciated. It’s often a sign that you’re pushing yourself either beyond your own limits because you feel guilty (and want to be a good colleague, veterinarian, spouse or friend) or someone else is imposing their expectations, views or values on you. “When someone acts in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable, that’s a cue to you that they may be violating or crossing a boundary,” she says.

**Boundaries at work**

In a clinic setting, there will always be times where clients will test a veterinarian’s limits. For example, a client might be disrespectful of the efforts made by the veterinarian to take care of their pet, with the purpose to make the veterinarian feel guilty. They might be upset at the cost of care and the veterinarian might start thinking, “It’s my job to do what is best for pets, so maybe it’s my job to make this person like me by caring for their pet at my expense.” But the what the veterinarian should ask themselves is: “Are my values being compromised?” *Yes.* “Is this a boundary that I have set for myself?” *Yes.* “Does this feel okay?” *No.*”

By holding themselves accountable to their boundaries, the veterinarian can avoid being a people-pleaser. Instead of owning the client’s issue of paying for treatment and taking on their stress, the veterinarian could discuss the options with the client, with the understanding that it’s up to the client to decide what to do based on their finances. This may feel uncomfortable at first, especially if you’re used to being a people-pleaser or feeling responsible for everyone’s pet care, but it’s a skillset, and over time it gets easier.

As researcher and author [Brené Brown](https://brenebrown.com/), an expert on vulnerability, shame, courage and worthiness, puts it: “How can we expect people to put value on our work when we don’t value ourselves enough to set and hold uncomfortable boundaries?”

Dr. Colleen Best is a veterinarian and instructor of wellness and resiliency in the profession (including OVMA’s MindFit workshop). She understands that when a boundary means saying “no” to something, it doesn’t always feel good or comfortable. “For example, I have two small children and a spouse, but I also love my work,” she says. “There are times when I have to turn down something I’d really like to do because it would mean more time away and more time juggling with the kids. It doesn’t feel good to say no, but I know long-term, it’s better for me.”

When Brown’s team researched why people hesitate to set boundaries, the majority of people answered, “I don’t want to make people mad, disappoint others, or make them stop liking me.” The next reason was related to the first: “I don’t know how to set boundaries without sounding selfish or unlikeable.” What Brown found interesting is that when the same participants were asked to describe or explain the consequence of not setting boundaries, the overwhelming response was resentment, followed by anger and then frustration. “These emotions eat away at our individual and collective confidence and trust,” says Brown. “They lead to people talking behind each other’s backs and to blame. This is why it’s important to set, hold and respect boundaries. Even when it’s hard.”

**Why should you build a fence?**

While setting boundaries may seem like a really uncomfortable option, consider all of the benefits.

1. **Prevent burn out.** Establishing clear boundaries for yourself allows you to know when to say no and helps prevent burn out. In many of her videos, Brown says that establishing your own personal fences can do wonders for your well-being. She says, “I’d rather be loving and generous but very straightforward with what’s okay and what’s not okay.”
2. **Take better care of yourself.** Self-awareness is recognizing your needs and feelings as your own, rather than being tied to a person or your environment. Creating your own limitations is an inherently self-aware act that can be beneficial to your own welfare. Setting a boundary recognizes the need for a healthy separation between your thoughts and feelings and the thoughts and feelings of others. In doing so, you end up taking better care of yourself by prioritizing your own well-being. It’s not a selfish act to take care of yourself and your needs, while also considering the needs of others. It makes you more effective and less burned out from helping when you set some limits for yourself.
3. **Be less stressed.** Becoming less stressed is something most people want, but without establishing your own limits, you risk taking on everyone’s problems in addition to your own, draining your own psychological resources.
4. **Live your life on your terms.** When you don’t have set boundaries, Brown says it gives other people the power over your own life, which can lead to anger. “We let people get away with things that are not okay,” she explains. “Then we just become more resentful and hateful.” Being clear about your boundaries doesn’t mean you have to be abrasive, just direct.
5. **Live more of the life you want.** By exercising your right to say “no” to unnecessary obligations, you create opportunities to do more of the work and activities you want to do.
6. **You become a more compassionate person.** Brown shares, “One of the shocking findings of my work was the idea that the most compassionate people I have interviewed were absolutely the most ‘boundaried’. Compassionate people ask for what they need. They say no when they need to, and when they say yes, they mean it. They’re compassionate because their boundaries keep them out of resentment.” When you're compassionate toward yourself about what you can tolerate, you're better able to express that to other people who have their own boundaries they want to follow.

Dr. Best strongly encourages everyone to make the time to set their own boundaries. “Boundaries allow you to live your life on purpose,” she says. “Proactively deciding on boundaries will allow you to be intentional about where you spend your time and energy, your non-renewable resources.” She knows that with a lack of boundaries, “Our time and energy can be spent (or stolen) in ways that don't reflect what our values are and what is truly important to us."

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